THE HISTORY OF

ROCK 74

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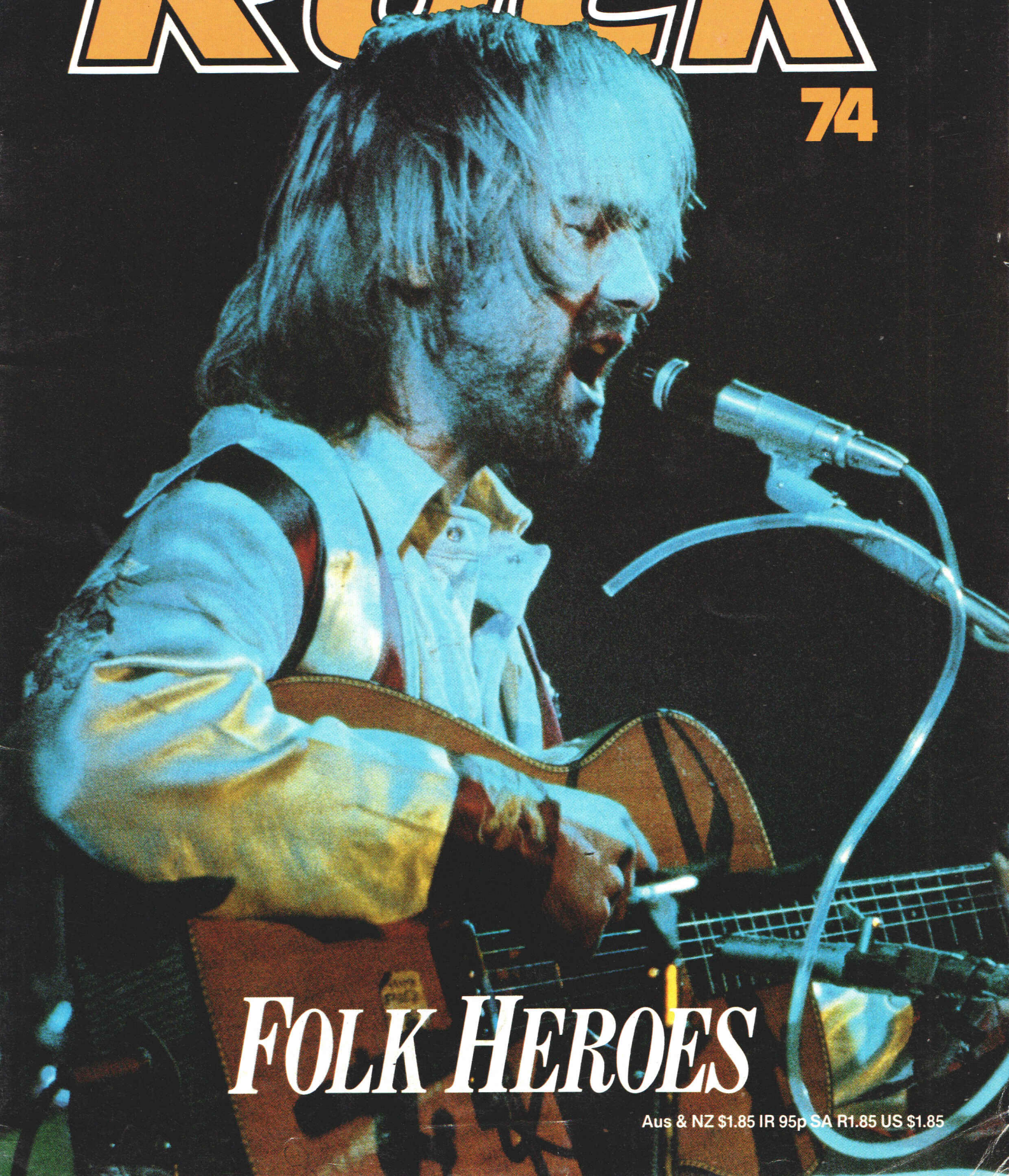

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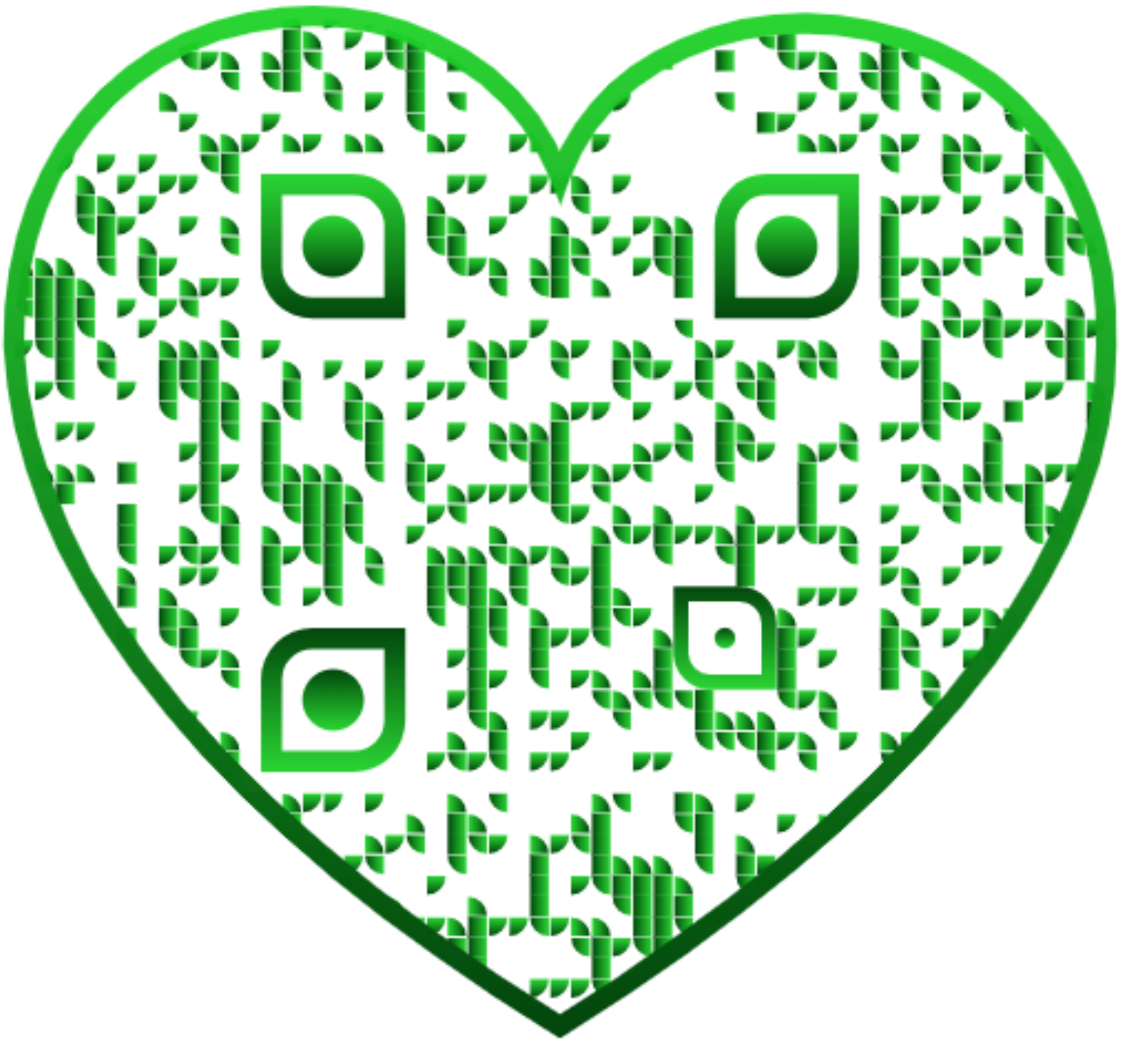

THE HISTORY OF ROCK

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Rock has always been the voice of rebellion and non-conformity, providing an outlet for the opinions of a vocal minority. Frank Zappa used the placid surface of late Sixties rock to float his brand of salacious, surreal and subversive music. His intention was to obtain a reaction from his audience – an aim shared by two bands from Detroit, the MC5 and Iggy and the Stooges. Both made their mark, the former concerning themselves with radical politics while Iggy celebrated the baser aspects of life.

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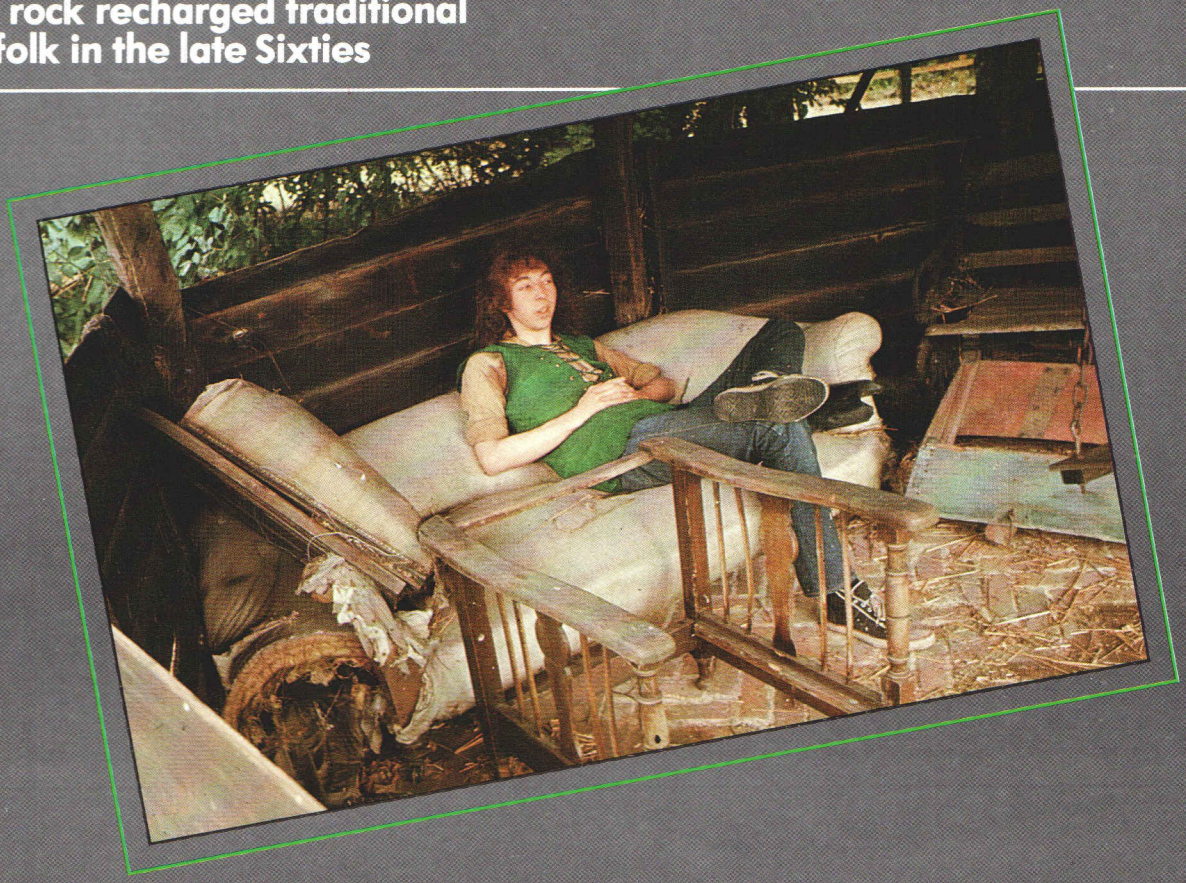
Rock Around the Maypole

Electric rock recharged traditional British folk in the late Sixties



Richard Thompson plays up to the traditional 'finger-in-the-ear' image of British folk that he, together with fellow members of Fairport Convention, did so much to dispel. Since leaving the band, he continued to work in the folk-rock field, both solo and with wife Linda.

OPINIONS VARY as to whether British folk-rock began with the release of Davy Graham and Shirley Collins' *Folk Roots, New Routes* in 1964, the Incredible String Band's *5000 Spirits Or The Layers Of The Onion* in 1967, the first Pentangle album in the following year or Fairport Convention's 1969 release, *What We Did On Our Holidays*. Whatever the truth, it is certain that the emergence of a specifically British form of folk-rock music in the late Sixties would not have been possible without the musical ferment of a decade earlier that went by the name of skiffle.

Although skiffle meant simply another musical fashion for the record industry (and one it could promote in the hope of swift profits), at grass-roots level it had provided a new kind of meeting-ground for a whole array of musicians who had previously found no obvious public outlet for their work. The initiators of the skiffle boom had been performers like Lonnie Donegan and Ken Colyer, both members of successful trad jazz bands, but the skiffle clubs also attracted people whose previous musical experience had been in experimental theatre, in radio drama or documentary or simply accompanying obscure records in the privacy of their front rooms. Skiffle also brought together a wide range of musical material. It proved to be the starting-point for two of the most significant trends in British music during the Sixties in the rhythm and blues scene and the music of the folk clubs.

Within the folk-club movement, however, the cheerful eclecticism of the skiffle era was not preserved. It became evident early in the Sixties that the folk scene was divided into two camps. Some clubs became exclusively traditionalist, populated mainly by hand-over-the-ear singers who performed either unaccompanied or with the approved 'traditional' accompaniment of guitar, concertina or fiddle. The 'contemporary' clubs on the other hand featured blues and ragtime instrumentalists as well as singer-songwriters. Each type of club, in its own way, was to make a contribution to the impact of folk on the wider rock arena in the late Sixties.

Solo in Soho

Two of the most renowned contemporary folk clubs were to be found in London – Les Cousins in Soho and the Scots Hoose in Cambridge Circus. The halcyon days of 1963-65 saw them play host to such performers as Paul Simon, Ralph McTell, Davy Graham, Al Stewart, Roy Harper, Donovan, the Young Tradition, Bert Jansch and even, occasionally, Bob Dylan. The most inventive of these fell into two main categories – the 'folk-baroque' guitarists and the singer-songwriters.

The key figure among the first category was Davy Graham. He came to the Soho folk scene having travelled throughout Europe and North Africa, and brought a range of musical influences to match. His repertoire included Irish and English traditional tunes, pieces based on Indian ragas and jazz standards. In playing

each piece, he exhibited a style that absorbed and fused together elements from all those traditions. Graham was also one of the first members of the folk scene to land a recording contract. His second album, *Folk Roots, New Routes*, was a collaboration with traditionalist singer Shirley Collins that predated the mingling of approaches that would characterise the later folk-rock work of Sandy Denny with Fairport Convention.

At the time, though, Graham's work was so original that nobody followed its lead fully. But he did inspire a whole group of young guitarists to expand the vocabulary of traditional folk-playing. The most gifted among them were Bert Jansch and John Renbourn. The gaunt Jansch also wrote his own songs and was one of the first 'stars' of the folk circuit. He did not reach beyond the clubs until 1967, however, when he formed the first of the British folk 'crossover' groups, Pentangle, with Renbourn and singer Jacqui McShee. With a jazzy rather than rock-based rhythm section, and using acoustic guitars for the most part, Pentangle became firm favourites on the US and UK college circuits.

Jansch and Renbourn continued their solo careers after Pentangle's demise, but remained on the borderline between the folk world and a larger audience. Pentangle's bassist Danny Thompson went on to accompany a variety of singer/guitarists, including two of the most talented of the contemporary folk-club musicians in John Martyn and Ralph McTell. Martyn could claim to have been a one-man folk-rock movement, since he began to experiment with a range of electronic devices attached to his acoustic guitar that took him towards the rock mainstream.

Electrifying music

Ralph McTell, however, represented the second category of folk performers, being one of the British singer-songwriters to emerge from the Soho scene and establish themselves with concert-hall or rock-club audiences. Like Al Stewart, another folk-club graduate who was later to find success in the United States, McTell established a broad audience that included both folk-song enthusiasts and listeners to what has come to be called 'adult-oriented-rock'. He exemplified folk-rock in the broader sense of the term: music rooted in the folk scene that was developed and performed within the general popular-music context of concert halls, television series and major record companies. A contemporary of McTell's was Roy Harper, whose erratic career comprised work in the narrower sense of 'folk-rock': a specific musical *style* involving the mingling of folk-based songs and tunes with the sound and rhythm of electric instruments played in the rock mode.

Harper was unusual among the performers of folk-rock in this stricter sense in that he came from the contemporary wing of the folk scene. The majority of the folk musicians to embrace a rock idiom in the late Sixties and early Seventies had a traditionalist background. Their reasons for switching from acoustic to electric music were often a mixture of aesthetic, professional and frankly economic motives. Performers like Dave Swarbrick and Tim Hart felt that modern instrumentation and technology could enhance the dramatic impact of many traditional ballads. 'When you are dealing with, say, violence – someone slashing with a sword,' said Swarbrick, 'there are sounds which exist electrically – with electric bass, say – that can very explicitly suggest what the words are saying.' Tim Hart's defence of folk-rock was to argue that rock instruments were as valid an accompaniment to folk songs as the acoustic guitars favoured by the folk purists: 'Most English song is unaccompanied song, and the only argument is – should you or should you not accompany it at all?'

Both Hart and Swarbrick (who were to become the mainstays of Steeleye Span and Fairport Convention respectively) also felt the restrictions of the folk scene. There was an exclusive, cultist feeling among many of those in charge that sought to preserve folk music from outsiders who might dilute it, thereby imposing a limitation on the size of audience the stars of the circuit might reach. Entrance to folk clubs in the Sixties cost only a few shillings and most clubs could hold less than 100 people, so the financial rewards and public recognition for even the most popular performers were relatively small.

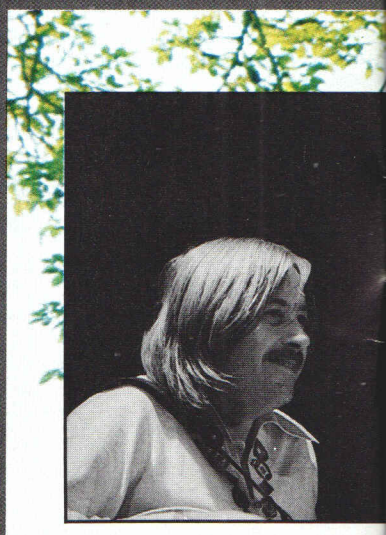
Breaking the mould

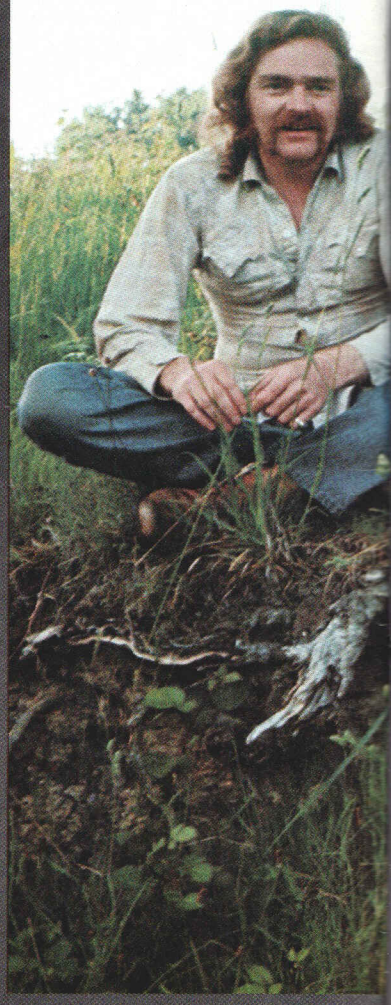
When the break into folk-rock came, it was through a group whose members had few folk roots at all. Fairport Convention was made up mainly of musicians inspired by the example of US groups like Jefferson Airplane and a liking for the songs of such writers as Joni Mitchell and Leonard Cohen. In 1967 they launched themselves into the growing London club scene, playing alongside the likes of Pink Floyd and the Incredible String Band. The latter was a group from the Glasgow folk scene with a Davy Graham-like range of musical influences and a selection of songs that mingled the direct imagery of the folk tradition with a vague spirituality in keeping with the hippie mood of the times.

Fairport turned to British folk-rock through vocalist Sandy Denny who joined in 1968, bringing with her a repertoire of traditional ballads from the folk clubs. Rock arrangements of these featuring the original guitar-style of Richard Thompson soon became the keystone of the band's repertoire. Other bands followed suit: Steeleye Span was formed in 1969, and the first of Ashley Hutchings' various Albion Bands in 1972. Steeleye and Fairport were to remain by far the two most successful folk-rock bands during the Seventies, despite the fact that both were afflicted by frequent personnel changes, with the departing members often founding (usually short-lived) rival groups.

Many bands sprang up in the folk-rock field in the Seventies, but most found it difficult to survive for any length of time. Scotland supplied the JSD Band, Newcastle offered Lindisfarne, later Jack the Lad and Hedgehog Pie (who only kept going by switching back from an electric to an acoustic line-up), while the Amazing Blondel, Planxty, Mr Fox, Decameron and the Dransfields appeared elsewhere. All had many valid musical ideas, but without exception were eventually defeated by their position in a no-man's-land between the introverted folk world and the increasingly

Inset below: Singer-songwriter Ralph McTell joins Dave Swarbrick on stage at a Fairport Convention reunion concert in 1979. Bottom: Newcastle's Lindisfarne found success with their particular brand of Geordie folk-rock.





conservative rock scene, where promoters and recording executives were suspicious of new ideas. Eventually the sheer cost of keeping an electric group on the road took its toll.

The folk-rock exemplified by Steeleye Span and Fairport Convention died sometime in the late Seventies, but the notion of a merging of the energies of folk music and rock still retained its potency. In 1982, Kevin Rowland's Dexy's Midnight Runners boldly experimented in fusing folk with white soul, scoring a Number 1 hit with 'Come On Eileen', while a succession of singers and bands have come up with the odd folk-influenced single whose novelty has caught the public's imagination.

DAVE LAING

Inset below left: Al Stewart, a graduate of the folk circuit who found commercial success in the States during the Seventies. Inset below: 'Folk-baroque' guitarist Davy Graham was one of the first British folkies to secure a recording contract.

FAIRPORT'S FULL HOUSE

The Convention that became an institution

IF MUSICAL INFLUENCE were rewarded with ready money, Fairport Convention would have been a very rich group indeed. Talking of 'Fairport Convention' is never quite that simple, however: they were never just one band. During their official 12-year existence, Fairport recorded nearly 20 albums, saw over 20 musicians through the ranks and were responsible for nurturing the careers of some of Britain's finest rock talents. Without Fairport, there would have been no Steeleye Span, Matthews Southern Comfort, Plainsong, Fotheringay, Richard and Linda Thompson, Albion Band, Home Service or, probably, Moving Hearts. Fairport were genuinely inspirational, setting an example for a generation of British bands. Their fusion of traditional folk and rock infuriated purists, but made many rock fans aware of Britain's folk tradition.

Fairport were quick to attain a legendary status after their formation. By the end of the Sixties it seemed they had always been there – an ever-changing band of folk gypsies playing an intoxicating brew of

skirling ethnic melodies, golden ballads and driving rock. They perfected the electric-folk form both live and on record, at their very best when led by the furious fiddling of Dave Swarbrick and the lustrous vocals of Sandy Denny. What Fairport most memorably brought to folk was a dynamic electric tension: masterpieces like 'Matty Groves', 'Sloth' and 'Hanging Song' crackle with drama, emotion and a sense of fatefulness. This same power also supercharges the band's jigs and reels.

Muswell hillbillies

The seeds of Fairport Convention were sown in the North London suburb of Muswell Hill by Ashley Hutchings, a skiffle and Radio Luxembourg fan and bass player, who formed a series of blues and country-based bands in the mid Sixties, among them the Electric Dysentery and the Ethnic Shuffle Orchestra. With rhythm guitarist Simon Nicol, drummer Martin Lamble and the precociously talented Richard Thompson on lead guitar joining Hutchings, Fairport Convention began to take shape in early 1967.

The group took their name from Simon Nicol's house, and once together played the usual round of church halls and friends' parties with a repertoire that was heavily American-influenced – including songs by Bob Dylan, Richard Farina, Phil Ochs and Jefferson Airplane. But Fairport were light on the vocal front, so two singers, Judy Dyble and former Bradford City footballer Ian Matthews, were invited to join.

Pioneering American record-producer and London underground figure Joe Boyd spotted the six-piece group at a London psychedelic club, Happening 44, and – fascinated by 17-year-old Richard Thompson's fluid guitar style – offered them work on the busy underground circuit, notably at UFO, which he ran, and Middle Earth. He also secured them a recording deal with Track Records: the first Fairport Convention single was a Thirties jazz song, 'If I Had A Ribbon Bow', which sank unnoticed. Their debut album was recorded for Polydor, and included songs by the then-unknown Joni Mitchell, and a rare Dylan song, 'Jack O'Diamonds', alongside the band's own material.

Sandy on holiday

Following Judy Dyble's departure to Giles, Giles and Fripp, Fairport recruited Sandy Denny in May 1968. Sandy had attended Kingston Art College and, while working as a nurse, had begun singing solo around the London folk clubs, later joining an early line-up of the Strawbs. With Sandy's influence – and her full, effulgent voice to the fore – the band began to tap the rich seam of traditional folk music and entered their most artistically successful period. A shimmering version of the traditional 'Nottamun Town' on 1969's *What We Did On Our Holidays* indicated the new direction. It was a confident debut on the Island label – the album radiated delicacy, and introduced such Fairport favourites as 'Fotheringay' and 'Meet On The Ledge'.

Inset opposite: Fairport convene in 1968 – from left Martin Lamble, Simon Nicol, Judy Dyble, Richard Thompson, Ian Matthews and Ashley Hutchings. Opposite: Sandy Denny. Above: 1969 Convention with Sandy and new boys Dave Swarbrick (in sandals) and Dave Mattacks (in sunglasses).

Fairport Convention were not the first group to tackle sacrosanct folk music in a fresh way – Pentangle and Sweeney's Men had already issued their imaginative debut albums. But when Fairport recorded their interpretation of 'A Sailor's Life' on their third album, *Unhalfbricking* (1969), both they and producer Boyd realised what a landmark it was. One of the best-known traditional songs, it was transformed into a seething electric jam, a masterful combination of folk, rock and jazz. 'A Sailor's Life' also featured the traditional folk world's best-known fiddler, Dave Swarbrick. Swarb's reputation in the folk scene was impeccable – he was especially renowned for his work with the Ian Campbell Folk Group and Martin Carthy.

Swarbrick's arrival brought a vast knowledge of traditional music into the band, but his whole-hearted embracing of Fairport's iconoclastic 'folk-rock' upset the traditionalists. With that third album, Fairport also demonstrated they had two brilliant 'in-house' writers in Sandy Denny, who contributed her finest song, the haunting, autumnal 'Who Knows Where The Time Goes', and Richard Thompson, whose contributions included the atmospheric 'Genesis Hall'. Also on the LP was 'Si Tu Dois Partir', a rousing version of Dylan's 'If You Gotta Go', which gave Fairport their only hit single when it reached Number 21 in the UK Top Thirty in July 1969.

Ian Matthews, unhappy with the band's growing emphasis on electric-folk, had left during the recording of *Unhalfbricking*. He went on to form the country-influenced Matthews Southern Comfort immediately after leaving Fairport, and had a UK Number 1 single in 1970 with Joni Mitchell's 'Woodstock'. Matthews later formed Plainsong and afterwards went solo.

Liege lords

Returning from a gig in Birmingham in June 1969, Fairport were involved in a motorway smash and drummer Martin Lamble was killed. The tragedy marked a turning-point for the band. After deciding to carry on, Fairport called in drummer Dave Mattacks, confirmed Dave Swarbrick as a permanent member, and went on to record British folk-rock's crucial album. *Liege And Lief* was released in December 1969, and brought Fairport's experiments in electric-folk to magnificent fruition. By applying the immediacy and technology of rock to a traditional ballad like 'Matty Groves', Fairport found themselves in the vanguard of an exciting new movement.

While folk artists like Davy Graham and Shirley Collins had approached traditional music from a strictly non-traditional angle, Fairport were the first rock band to do so. Their urgent electric music accentuated the powerful rhythms the traditional songs contained, and yet opened up the rich legacy of traditional folk to a vast young audience. Richard Thompson and Dave Swarbrick, in a fruitful but short-lived partnership, collaborated on songs strongly in the traditional idiom, as the sad and gentle 'Crazy Man Michael' from *Liege And Lief* and the beautifully restrained 'Sloth' from *Full House* (1970) testify.

Just when the time seemed right for Fairport to capitalise on the innovatory *Liege And Lief*, the group was split down the middle. Ashley Hutchings, founder-member, bass-player and prime mover behind the switch to electric-folk, left the band. He wished to explore the possibilities of folk-rock in a more traditional vein and went on to form Steeleye Span with Gay and Terry Woods. Meanwhile, Sandy Denny saw Fairport irrevocably bound to traditional compositions, which she saw as an inevitable limitation on her own writing, and left to start Fotheringay.

The band decided to press on and swiftly engaged bassist Dave Pegg, formerly with various Birmingham R&B bands and an old pal of Swarbrick in the Ian Campbell Folk Group. Finding a singer proved more of a problem; contractually committed to recording another album, the five remaining members – Thompson, Nicol, Mattacks, Swarbrick and Pegg – went into the studio without a recognised vocalist to cut one of their best albums, *Full House*.

Early in 1971, guitarist Richard Thompson quit the band to pursue a solo career. His post-Fairport career has been sporadic, but richly rewarding, yielding such fine solo albums as *Henry The Human Fly* (1972), and six with his wife Linda, notably *I Want To See The Bright Lights Tonight* (1974) and *Shoot Out The Lights* (1982).

June delight

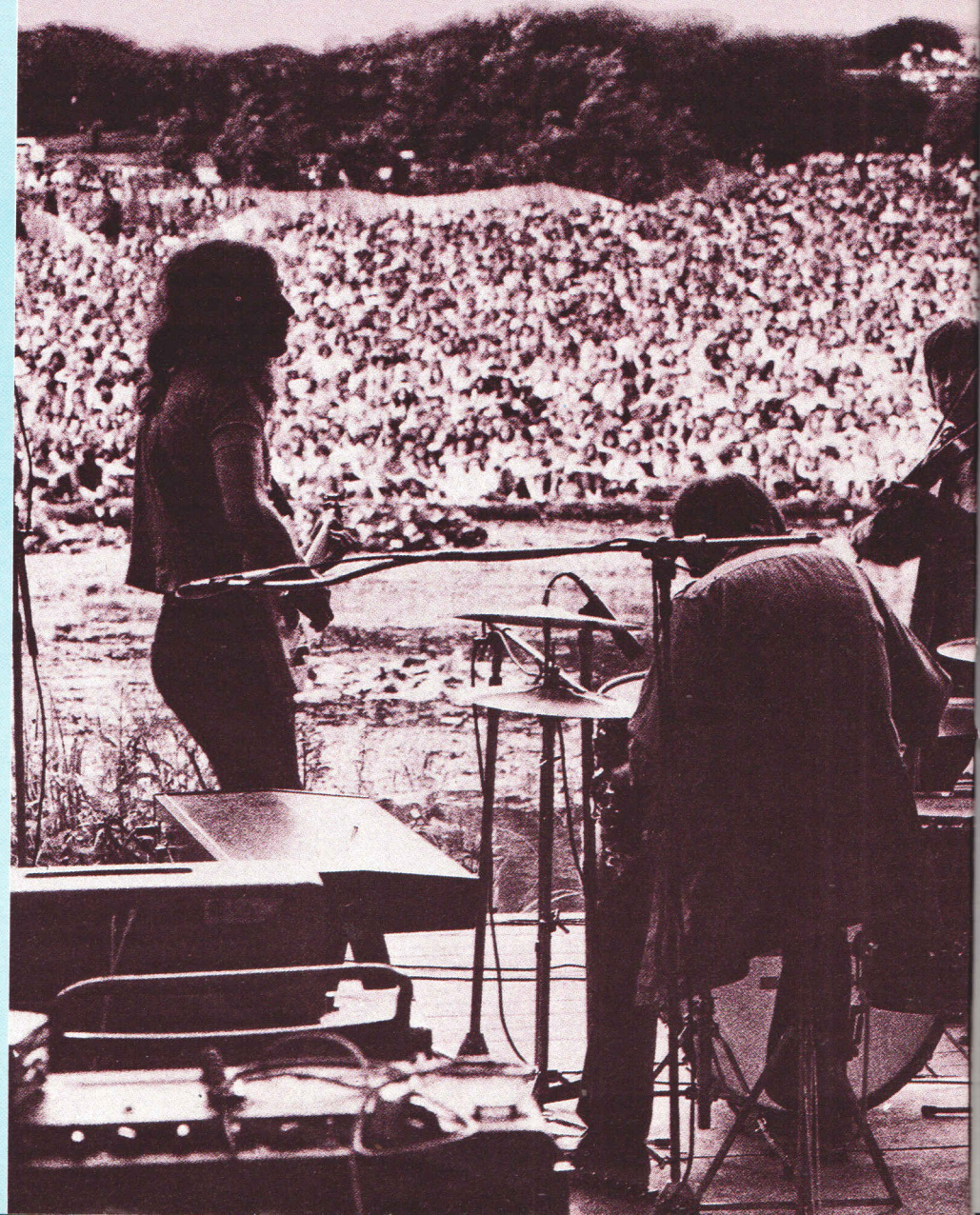
Thompson's departure from Fairport saw the band enter their most confused period. Simon Nicol switched to lead guitar in Thompson's wake, and admitted it was like 'trying to be Hank Marvin *and* Bruce Welch'. In June 1971 the new slim-line four-piece Fairport released *Angel Delight*. The album blended new and traditional material in the same successful formula as *Full House*, and demonstrated Swarbrick's growing facility as an artful-voiced singer – particularly on the comic Fairport autobiography of 'Angel Delight' itself, and on the bawdy 'Bonny Black Hare'. It was Swarbrick's energy, too, that saw through the *Babbacombe Lee* concept album, released that November. The true story of John 'Babbacombe' Lee – a convicted murderer who cheated the hangman three times – provided Fairport with the ideal narrative for some of their most dramatic songs, notably 'Hanging Song'.

Upset by the group's criticism of his production of the album, Simon Nicol – the last original member of Fairport Convention – quit at the end of 1971. It was to be 18 months before Fairport released another album. A fluctuating series of line-ups followed, and even Fairport's most devout fans felt the group could not carry on. It took the arrival of Trevor Lucas and American-born Jerry Donahue from Sandy Denny's defunct Fotheringay (plus the return of drummer Dave Mattacks) to give Fairport the creative shot in the arm they sorely needed.

The new line-up found its feet in 1973 with the patchy *Rosie* album, following this with a classic in *Fairport Convention Nine*. The latter saw Fairport again imaginatively tackling traditional folk material (for example 'Polly On The Shore'), but also incorporating songs influenced by country and western music. Lucas was by now married to Sandy Denny and in March 1974 Fairport's most famous singer rejoined the group herself.

This new line-up undertook a successful world tour, and recorded the impressive *Rising For The Moon* album in 1974. It looked as though Fairport Convention were set to become a major force again, but the album's release preceded the departure of Sandy, Trevor and Dave Mattacks.

Despite being voted Britain's Best Female Singer for two consecutive years in



the *Melody Maker* poll, Sandy Denny never attained the success of her North American singer-songwriter contemporaries, though Judy Collins' version of 'Who Knows Where The Time Goes' testified to her influence. Sandy proved her talent as early as the charming album she recorded with the Strawbs in 1967, allowed it to blossom during her first stint with Fairport and let it grow to full maturity with her group Fotheringay and on her four solo albums. Those albums (notably 1971's *The North Star Grassman And The Raven*) demonstrated her broad musical knowledge as well as her own writing skill – and, of course, that crystal-clear voice.

Between her stays with Fairport, Sandy took time off from her solo career to duet with Robert Plant on 'The Battle of Evermore' on the fourth Led Zeppelin album (1971), took part in Lou Reizner's 1972 production of the Who's rock-opera *Tommy* and recorded an album of rock'n'roll standards with the Bunch in 1972. Her tragic death from a brain haemorrhage (following a fall) at the age of 31 in 1978 robbed British rock music of one of its most precious talents.

Fairport's changing faces. Below: The class of '71 – from left Nicol (who switched to lead guitar after Thompson's departure), Mattacks, Swarbrick and Dave Pegg. Opposite: On television in 1973 with Trevor Lucas (left) and Jerry Donahue (centre). Above: A 1975 appearance with Sandy Denny back in the fold and Swarbrick at full throttle.

Time, gentlemen, please

Former Grease Band drummer Bruce Rowland had joined Fairport (which very briefly became the band's name), and with an enlarged line-up (including the Breton Dan Ar Bras, Alan Stivell's guitarist) they recorded their last album for Island, the disastrous *Gottle O'Geer* (1976). This version of Fairport was short-lived, too, and with founder member Simon Nicol rejoining the nucleus of Swarbrick, Pegg and Rowland, and a new record deal with Vertigo, Fairport Convention continued their remarkable saga with an unexpectedly fine album in 1977 – *The Bonny Bunch Of Roses*, notable for its epic title track and the economy of the band's playing. Strong as that album was, it proved to be a flash in the pan, and after two further desultory albums, *Tipplers Tales* (1978) and *Farewell Farewell* (1979), Fairport called it a day in the summer of 1979.

Dave Pegg went straight into Jethro Tull; Simon Nicol and Dave Swarbrick continued to perform acoustically around the folk clubs; Bruce Rowland was kept busy with sessions, while Dave Mattacks played on Paul McCartney's 1982 album *Tug Of War*. By 1980, in true Fairport fashion, they were back together again for their first annual reunion at the village of Cropredy, Oxfordshire.

Fairport Convention will be remembered for a lot more than cosy nostalgia, however. They were the first band to demonstrate the possibilities of marrying rock'n'roll rhythms to traditional folk material. From Fairport's initial fusion, the band developed its own identity. And from under that Fairport umbrella came talents like Sandy Denny, Richard Thompson and Ashley Hutchings. The group's legacy is the rich mine of electric folk-rock they opened up. The rest, as they say, is history.

PATRICK HUMPHRIES

Fairport Convention
Recommended Listening

The History Of Fairport Convention (Island ICD 4) (Includes: Meet On The Ledge, Sailor's Life, Sloth, Matty Groves, Who Knows Where The Time Goes, Hanging Song, Fotheringay).

The Incredibles' Journey

Trailblazing sounds from the Incredible String Band

THE PRICE TO PAY for being a part of your time is that you may not fit into any other. Some old pop music appeals because it is timeless and some because it is indelibly stamped with the mark of its era. Along with Donovan and George Harrison, the Incredible String Band summed up for many people what life was all about in the late Sixties.

Clive's Incredible String Band, as the outfit was originally known, was formed in Edinburgh in 1965 by Clive Palmer (banjo, guitar and vocals) and Robin Williamson (violin, guitar and vocals). After playing around the then-burgeoning folk club circuit in and around Edinburgh, the duo was joined at the end of the year by guitarist and singer Mike Heron. The 'Clive' prefix was dropped and the Incredible String Band was born.

Mad hatters

The folk scene in 1965 was a lot closer to Tin Pan Alley than it is today. Though their music was far from traditional, Donovan, Bob Dylan, and Joan Baez had all made the Top Twenty with just their acoustic guitars for backing: and the hypnotic nasal drone that broadly typified folk-rock vocals found echoes in the fully-fledged pop music of the Beatles, the Byrds and Sonny and Cher. It was thus possible for three Scotsmen virtually unknown outside their home town to secure a long-term album deal with Elektra, itself fast developing a reputation as a 'progressive' international label.

The first LP, simply entitled *The Incredible String Band*, was recorded in one afternoon at Sound Techniques in Chelsea and released in mid 1966. In comparison to what was to come, it was a simple record; there were no overdubs and fairly simple lyrics. But what was immediately impressive was the degree to which these unknowns had developed such a unique, personal and intricate way of songwriting – or, at least, two of them had. The bulk of

the material was divided between Heron and Williamson, with Clive Palmer contributing only one song and a banjo instrumental. Ousted by the exploding creativity of the others, Palmer took his share of the recording advance and disappeared south.

What remained was to be the Incredible String Band at its best. 'Band' seemed an exaggerated way to describe only two musicians, but, with the aid of newly-developed techniques of multi-tracking, they soon created a sort of humming, buzzing, crawling sound that at times resembled a hive set to music, at other times a choir of lost souls moaning in a long-abandoned Highland fortress. Heron and Williamson could make two musicians sound like twenty.

With Palmer gone, it was at once apparent how complementary the remaining duo were. Mike Heron songs like 'Painting Box', 'The Hedgehog's Song' and 'Little Cloud' were catchy and accessible in a way that perfectly offset the exotic and sinuous meanderings of Williamson. And it was on the second album, *The 5000 Spirits Or The Layers Of The Onion* (1967), that the typical Incredible String Band sound first appeared, particularly on 'The Mad Hatter's Song' where sitar, double-bass and piano all featured by turns as Robin Williamson strung together ten tunes in five minutes.

The *5000 Spirits* remains to this day eerie, remote, wistful, humorous and exciting. As with the follow-up LP – *The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter*, released in March 1968 – the prime feeling was one of expectancy, a feeling that there is more to life than meets the eye, that every physical thing harbours a spirit of some sort. The music of the Incredible String Band depicted a clear-cut lifestyle, one of living in the country, vegetarianism, Scientology, concern for all living things and hefty slices of cannabis and LSD.

By this stage, the duo had become celebrated multi-instrumentalists; Heron restricted himself to guitar, sitar and keyboards but Williamson managed to play gimbri (a kind of mournful Arab fiddle), mandolin, Jew's harp, whistle, harmonica and drums as well. They had acquired an intensely devoted following, who helped *The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter* to reach Number 7 in the UK album charts, and in mid 1968 the underground paper *International Times* commented: 'The Incredible String Band can only become more incredible.' But the paper had got it wrong. For – like many wayward talents – what made the duo great was also their undoing. Aided by their scriptures, their drugs and their faithful following, Heron

Opposite: The Incredible String Band exude a festive spirit on stage. Below: Mike Heron (left) and Robin Williamson with girlfriends Rose and Licorice and an assortment of exotic instruments.

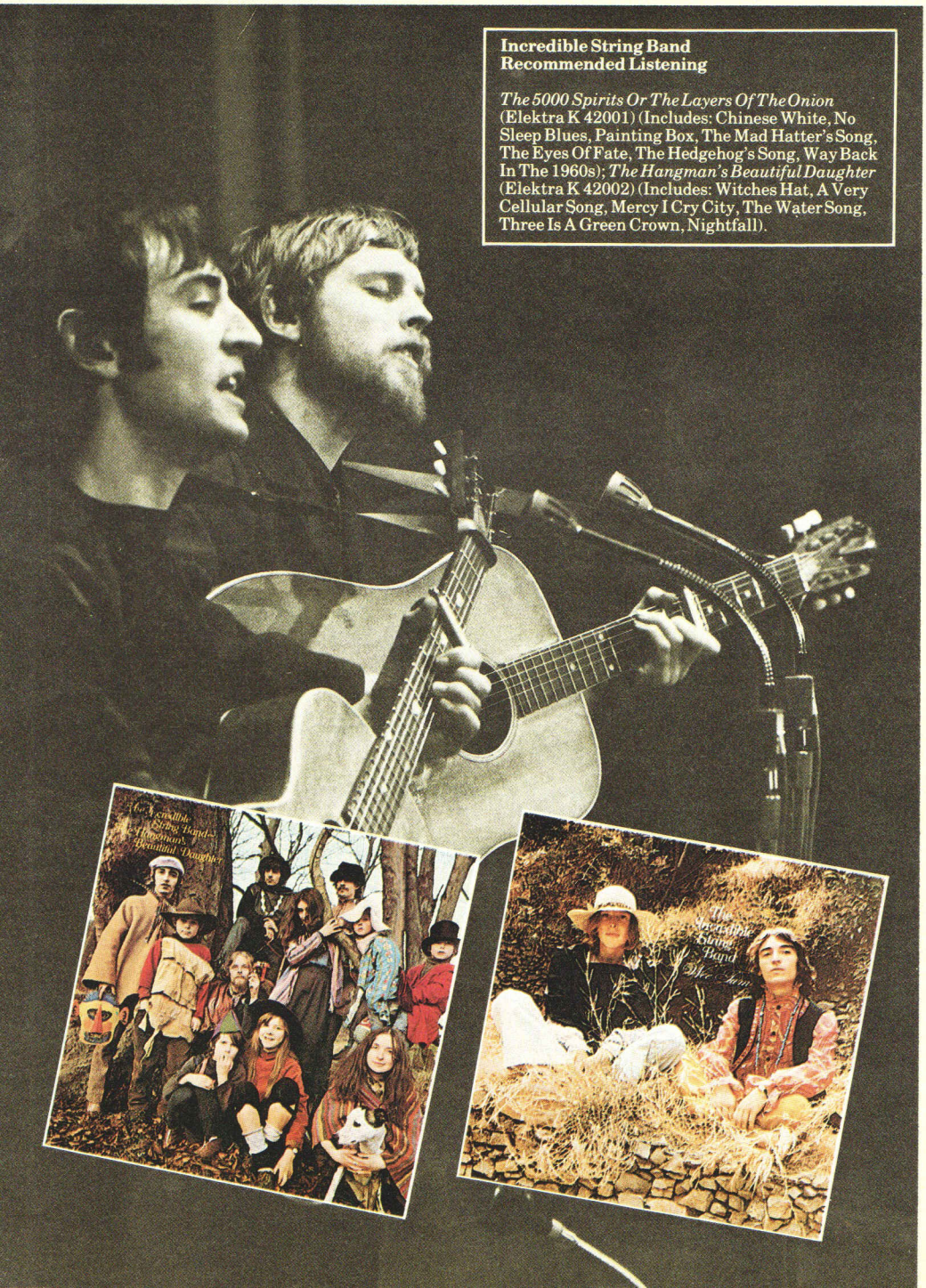
and Williamson had created an innocent, childlike world of their own. That they were sincere is beyond doubt, and such was their sincerity that they eventually abandoned drugs and embraced Scientology as a means of fixing a permanent smile on their faces where grass had given them only a temporary one.

At this turning point they recorded their last great LP, a double album called *Wee Tam And The Big Huge*, which was released in the autumn of 1968. Their personalities had drifted nearer the surface but further away from each other, and by this stage they were accompanied on much of the material by their girlfriends Rose Simpson and Licorice McKechnie. While the girls may have enhanced the atmosphere at gigs, they contributed little to the albums that could not have been achieved by either Mike or Robin doing overdubs. The girls seemed there mainly for the purpose of keeping Heron and Williamson together by acting as a buffer between them.

Despite this, *Wee Tam* contained some of their best performances to date. Like a field in high summer, when the nights have already begun to draw back in, the music had reached the extent of its growth but still exuded a golden warmth. Mike Heron came up with the vintage singalong 'Cousin Caterpillar' and contributed some languid, jangling sitar to Robin Williamson's epic tales of mankind ('Maya') and lost time redeemed ('The Iron Stone'). 'The Yellow Snake', also with the classic guitar/sitar sound, was a timeless celebration of being, while on 'Douglas Traherne Harding' Mike sang an uncharacteristically long and rambling story about a man who has no head, one eye, a body filled with light and lives in a basement.

But by their next album, *Changing Horses*, a year later, the rot had set in and the spell was broken. Time had started to flow again and the band was trying to move with it: but whereas previously they had kept abreast of time, their incorporation of electric guitar, bass and drums ensured that they were now well behind it. Where they had sounded proficient, if a little stoned, on acoustic instruments, they sounded lost and amateurish on amplified ones. This was one area where Heron was a lot more at home than Williamson, with the result that, instead of complementing each other, they started to sound inappropriate on each other's tracks.

Below: Way back in the Sixties – Heron and Williamson harmonise and gather woodfolk for the cover of The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter *(inset left). Inset right: 1968's* Wee Tam *– their last great album.*



Incredible String Band Recommended Listening

The 5000 Spirits Or The Layers Of The Onion (Elektra K 42001) (Includes: Chinese White, No Sleep Blues, Painting Box, The Mad Hatter's Song, The Eyes Of Fate, The Hedgehog's Song, Way Back In The 1960s); *The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter* (Elektra K 42002) (Includes: Witches Hat, A Very Cellular Song, Mercy I Cry City, The Water Song, Three Is A Green Crown, Nightfall).

Silken dreams

The ISB's other problem was how to keep saying the same thing over and over and still make it sound fresh. The fixed grins seemed more hollow, the songs of praise less heartfelt and more obligatory, until the only great moments came when the masks slipped and the men behind the grins were allowed to sing out. Most of these moments came from Robin Williamson, after he had trimmed his epics, trimmed his hair, and valiantly struggled into early Seventies Kings Road gear to try and 'communicate' with the so-called real world. 1972 produced the dismal *Earthspan* LP, which featured bass-player/vocalist Malcolm LeMaistre, who tried to write old-style String Band songs because neither Mike nor Robin could be bothered.

Although their records were losing their colour, the band was still popular live. Rose and Licorice had made way for LeMaistre and a host of Scientologist session men, but Williamson and Heron somehow still charmed the audiences into the halls. They hardly played on each other's songs anymore, however – the exception being two beautiful tracks on their final LP, *Hard Rope And Silken Twine* (1974), both written by Williamson. 'Cold February' could have passed for an old Irish hymn, but was a deeply moving anti-war song, while 'Dreams Of No Return' featured for one final time the ecstatic blend of Mike's sitar and Robin's guitar, with no hamfisted concessions to rock 'n'roll.

The Incredible String Band finally split in November 1974, with Robin flying to California to immerse himself in various folk-music projects, and Mike forming several rock acts around the remains of the Incredibles. Sadly, what might have seemed progressive in the early Seventies, when Heron first manifested his hard-rock tendencies, seemed pointless and dated by the middle of the decade. Robin Williamson, meanwhile, showed on his solo LP releases that he was as stuck in folk as Heron was in rock, but these later deficiencies only served to highlight the early brilliance of the aptly-named Incredible String Band.

LUTHER PAISLEY

STEELEYE SPAN

The band that brought flamboyance to folk-rock

JOHN 'STEELEYE' SPAN was a waggoner on a North Lincolnshire farm in the early nineteenth century. He was immortalised in a song called 'Horkstow Grange', which described a fight between him and a labourer called John Bowlin. The song was brought to the English folk revival by the collector Percy Grainger, and caught the imagination of a club singer called Tim Hart. In 1969, when Tim found himself involved in choosing a name for an electric folk group, Steeleye Span came to mind.

At that time, the folk-rock music of Fairport Convention had still not reached a mass audience, but it had done enough to split the tightly-knit world of folk wide open. Did their controversial treatment of the British folk legacy mean its ultimate

Right: Original Steeleye – from left Ashley Hutchings, Gay and Terry Woods, Maddy Prior and Tim Hart. Below: Spanning the beach, 1978.

destruction, or was it an authentic development? At the time this question was being asked, Tim Hart and his partner Maddy Prior had outgrown the folk-club circuit and were looking for a new challenge. In the summer of 1969 they met up with former Fairport Convention member Ashley Hutchings and two Irish musicians, Gay and Terry Woods, all of whom wanted to explore electric folk.

Hutchings was convinced that Fairport Convention had not been faithful enough to the British folk-song repertoire, and that there was a need for a band who could produce rock arrangements of the original words and melodies of the folk tradition. So the five formed Steeleye Span, and in March 1970 they spent a week in the studio recording *Hark! The Village Wait*, their first album for RCA.

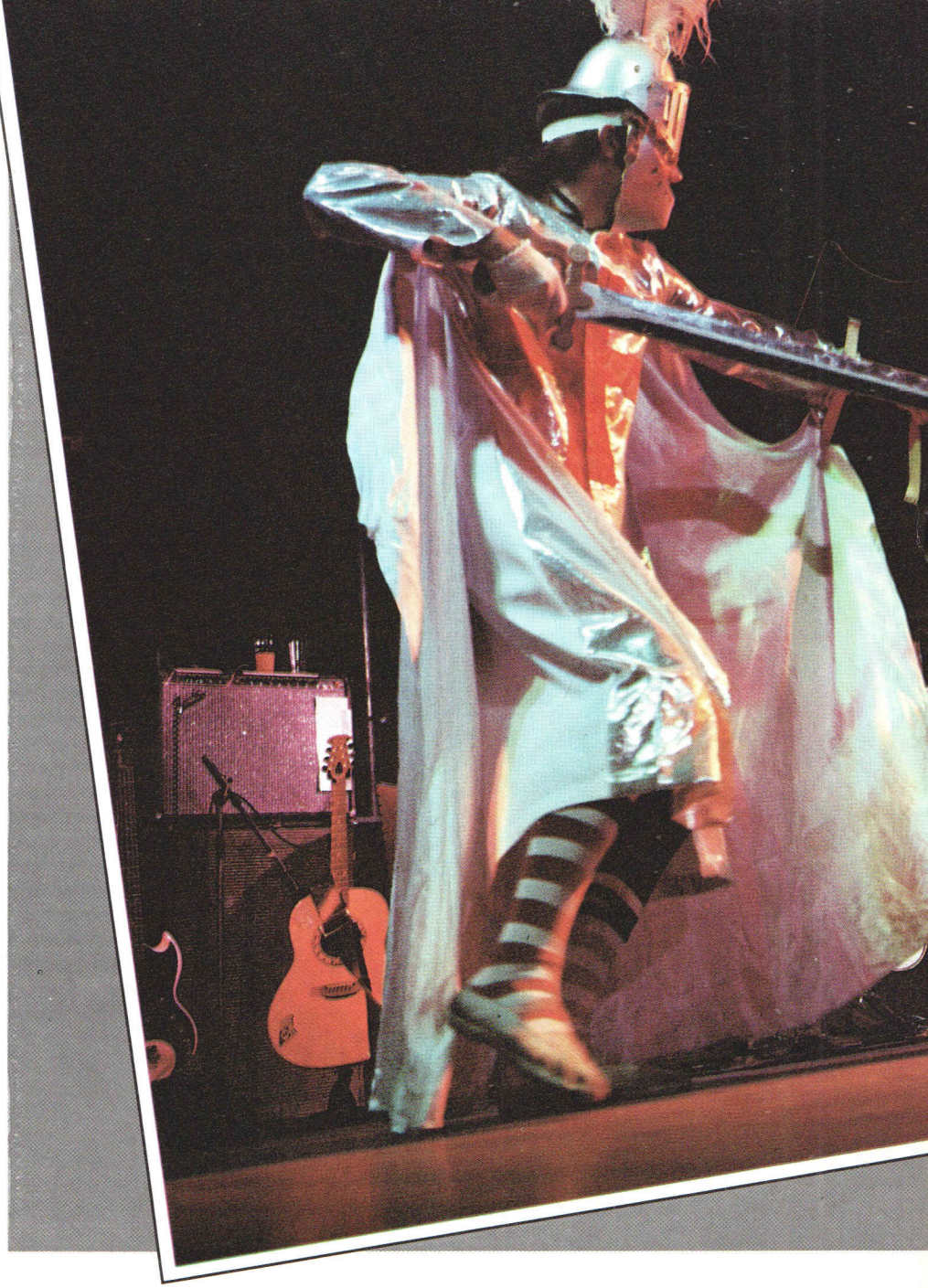
The album included Hutchings' electric bass and a range of stringed instruments from guitars to mandolin, but no drums. The songs were drawn from the traditional repertoires of England, Scotland and Ireland, and featured outstanding vocal duets by Gay Woods and Maddy Prior. Before the album was released, however, Steeleye Span suffered their first of many personnel changes when the Woods' left the band to return to Ireland.

Two turn up

Steeleye's first live concert was thus postponed until September 1970, by which time the line-up included two new members in guitarist Martin Carthy and fiddler Peter Knight. Carthy was already a highly respected folk musician, renowned for having tutored both Bob Dylan and Paul Simon in English folk songs. He had previously been part of an acoustic duo with violinist Dave Swarbrick, until Swarbrick had gone electric and joined Fairport Convention. Peter Knight, on the other hand, was an assistant in a London music shop and completely unknown.

Neither of the new members had played electric music before, and at first it showed. In live performances they tended to play at maximum volume. Fortunately, this was not the case on the line-up's first album together. Released in March 1971, *Please To See The King* remains one of the most original-sounding electric-folk experiments of the period, mainly because Martin Carthy had not grown up with a background in rock music. This was an advantage, as the range of amplified sounds on guitars, banjo and mandolin could be moulded to the contours of the folk melodies, rather than the melodies being subservient to the rock rhythm.

During 1971, Steeleye Span began to build up a reputation within the growing folk-rock movement in Britain, touring first with Jethro Tull and then headlining their own month-long tour. But the year ended with the departure of yet more members: Ashley Hutchings left to pursue his own ideas about English electric folk, while Martin Carthy returned to the folk-club scene.



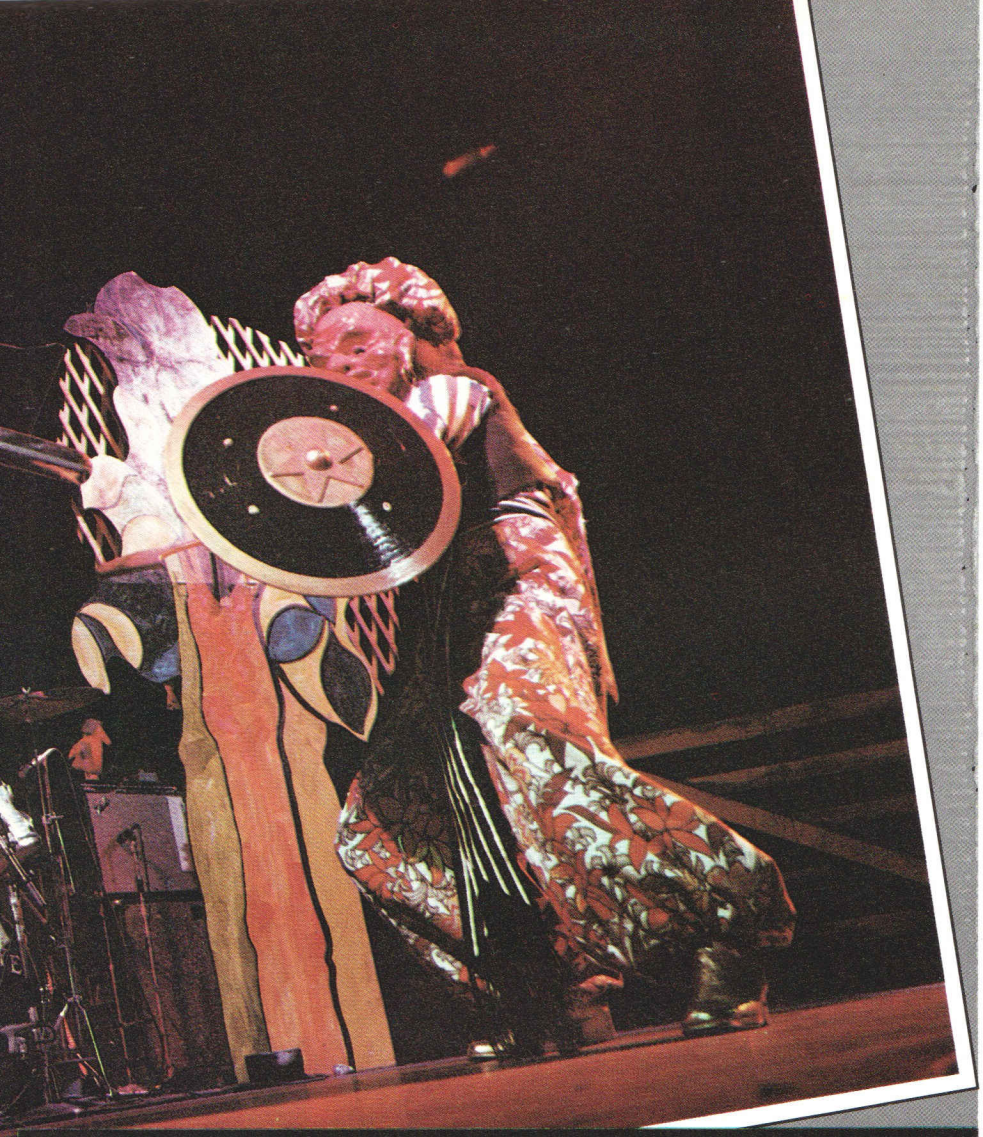
Stars in the making

This was a turning-point for the band, both musically and as a commercial proposition. They began to veer away from purist folk and seek an international reputation. Their musical direction for the next four years was set by the addition of two players with a strong rock background: Bob Johnson on guitar and bassist Rick Kemp, formerly with Michael Chapman. On the business side, Steeleye replaced their manager and record producer Sandy Roberton with Jo Lustig, an ebullient New Yorker who persuaded the band that he could make them worldwide stars.

Lustig's scheme was to apply to Steeleye the strategy that had made earlier British bands like Procol Harum and Jethro Tull global successes. This involved exhaustingly lengthy US tours, greater visual impact in live performance and regular album production. Between 1972 and 1976, the band went to the States four times and Australia twice, producing six studio albums along the way.

The Steeleye sound became heavier, shifting from the electric folk of the previous period to a folk-rock sound with a balanced mix of each type of music. Bob Johnson was in many ways a conventional rock guitarist (he had worked as a session man with P. J. Proby among others) and his strongly chorded style was well suited to some of the more melodramatic traditional lyrics that became Steeleye trademarks. These included 'Long Lankin' (recorded on the 1975 album *Commoner's Crown*), 'Thomas The Rhymer' and 'Seven Hundred Elves' (both from the previous year's *Now We Are Six*).

The title of this last album referred not only to its position as the band's sixth LP, but to a new member of the band. The addition of ex-Gnidrolog drummer Nigel Pegrum underlined the growing commitment to rock rhythms. *Now We Are Six* was



Top: The group perform their medieval mummers' play in 1974. Above: On stage in more familiar garb.

produced by Jethro Tull's Ian Anderson and featured a cameo appearance by David Bowie on saxophone.

The melodrama of the lyrics was matched by a more dramatic approach to stage performance. During 1971 and 1972 Steeleye had performed in historical plays written by Keith Dewhurst for theatres in London and Edinburgh, and these inspired Tim Hart to write a version of a medieval mummers' play for presentation as part of the Steeleye stage act. For this the band appeared in traditional costumes, wearing masks and miming their lines to a pre-recorded soundtrack. The play was taken to America and Australia in 1974.

Despite all the touring and the well-received albums, Steeleye never quite broke though to international star status. New manager Tony Secunda resorted to a variety of gimmicks to promote the band. In Australia he caused an uproar by offering '12 hours with a member of the band' as a competition prize, while the audience at a London concert in October 1976 were amazed to find pound notes floating down from the roof during an encore.

Storms and splits

At the start of 1977, Steeleye Span announced they were to stop work for six months. Even if Lustig's international strategy had not worked, they were solidly established within the UK, with two Top Ten singles behind them: the acappella 'Gaudete' (1973) and the strongly rhythmic 'All Around My Hat' (1975). The latter had been produced by Wombles mastermind Mike Batt, and its unashamedly pop format surprised many observers. But Bob Johnson and Peter Knight had begun work on an album called *The King Of Elfland's Daughter*, and in May 1977 they announced that they were to leave the band.

The four remaining members decided to continue for another album and British tour and brought back Martin Carthy and concertina virtuoso John Kirkpatrick to record the tenth Steeleye album, *Storm Force Ten*. The 'final UK tour' took place in March 1978, after which Tim Hart and Maddy Prior departed to pursue solo careers, while Nigel Pegrum devoted himself to his Plant Life folk record label. Rick Kemp took part in a number of projects as performer or producer and married Maddy Prior. But the individual musicians were to find that the reputation of Steeleye and the pressures to re-form were enormous.

A new album, *Sails Of Silver*, duly appeared in 1980 and the most successful Steeleye line-up (including Johnson, Kemp and Pegrum) again took to the road, undertaking a lengthy British tour and going on to headline 1981's Cambridge Folk Festival. But though the album broke new ground by adding different instrumental colours, the live performances were very much a re-creation of the Steeleye Span of 1976.

Steeleye's place in music history, however, is assured. Between 1972 and 1976 they were the group that most extensively and logically explored the folk-rock formula: they put in practice the theory that the way to make traditional songs into contemporary ones was to detach them from their original settings and unite them with the sounds and rhythms of modern mainstream rock.

DAVE LAING

Steeleye Span
Recommended Listening

Original Masters (Chrysalis CJT3) (Includes: All Around My Hat, Gaudete, Black Jack Davy, Thomas The Rhymer, Skewball, Saucy Sailor, Sir James The Rose, Jigs).

ROCK ON THE TYNE

MARTINI

Geordie good-times with Alan Hull and Lindisfarne

LINDISFARNE were rabble-rousers for Tyneside youth for a couple of years in the early Seventies. Each of their memorable concerts was a slice of Geordie life: the band's chugging, ribald folk-rock became the favoured sound of an always enthusiastic audience whose other passions were Newcastle Brown Ale and Newcastle United. They toured successfully throughout Britain, of course, but it was always on their home ground that they performed their music best – and not just the boozy, uptempo numbers. The fragile beauty of a song like 'Lady Eleanor', played live, showed the more contemplative side of Lindisfarne.

Lindisfarne's original line-up were together under that name for just three years, and after the band split up, none of its five members was to enjoy comparable success. The nucleus of the band came together in Newcastle during the mid Sixties. Ray Laidlaw (drums) and Ray Jackson (harmonica, mandolin) were art students, Simon Cowe (guitar) worked in a city-centre photographic store and Rod Clements (bass) was a student at Durham University.

'In the famous summer of 1967,' recalled Clements, 'we were the Downtown Faction, one of the underground bands in Newcastle, playing at places like the Key Club and the Club A Go Go, which the Animals wrote a song about. We also used to play at dances down at the coast in the summer and all the freaks came.' At this time, the band had two acts: an electric bluesy 'underground' set for the dances, and one with acoustic instruments, featuring their own compositions, for the folk clubs.

In 1968, the band, renamed the Brethren, met up with Alan Hull – a prolific local singer-songwriter and an established figure on the north-east folk club circuit. He had previously been in a Newcastle band called the Chosen Few who were contemporaries of the Animals and had cut a few singles in the mid Sixties. Initially, the Brethren backed Hull on some demonstration discs cut at a local studio, and these tracks were later released on a Rubber Records sampler called *Take Off Your Head And Listen*. Among them was 'We Can Swing Together', a number that became a Lindisfarne sing-along standard. Its constant revival, though, indicated one of the band's weaknesses – they were never able to produce a sufficient quantity of new material to match the old favourites.

Alan Hull and the Brethren then joined forces on a permanent basis and were signed to a recording contract by Tony Stratton-Smith, boss of the independent Charisma label. The name Lindisfarne – that of a Northumbrian island famous for its history and seventh-century Gospels – was chosen shortly before the release of the first LP, *Nicely Out Of Tune* (1970). Although both the playing and the production were more ragged than on subsequent recordings, the essential character of the band came through loud and clear. The album revealed Alan Hull's songwriting skills in the combination of lush romanticism employed on 'Lady Eleanor' and 'Clear White Light', with the earthy humour of 'We Can Swing Together', the raucous tale of a run-in with the forces of the law.

Dead-end ditties

Nicely Out Of Tune received polite rather than ecstatic reviews, and for the next Lindisfarne album Stratton-Smith brought in Bob Johnston, the renowned American producer of Bob Dylan and others. According to Rod Clements, the sound on *Fog On The Tyne* (1971) was very much Johnston's idea, and the crisper, neater sound paid off for the band. Early in 1972 they had their first hit single from the album when the Dylanesque 'Meet Me On The Corner', featuring Jackson's harmonica-playing, reached Number 5 in the UK. At the same time the album sales soared, and the LP spent 21 weeks in the Top Ten. Charisma then re-issued the earlier unsuccessful 'Lady Eleanor', which this time reached Number 3.

Although it was not intended to be a 'concept' album, the compositions on *Fog On The Tyne* were to be regarded as a set of songs, taking the theme of the young unemployed in a provincial city making what they could of a situation full of dead-ends. The title song treated the subject with both humour and irony, outlining the possibilities available to kids with too much time on their hands and too little money. The album's title track soon became the climax of Lindisfarne's live appearances in concert halls and at festivals in 1971 and 1972.

The audience participation engendered by Lindisfarne at their gigs was remarkable. But that participation, and the expectations that the band would provide more such anthems, contributed to the failure of the third album *Dingly Dell* (1972).

By this time the band was under some strain. Two American tours had failed to reproduce their British success, and Alan Hull was finding it hard to produce enough new songs for recording. Several of the tracks on *Dingly Dell* were old numbers, and the title piece was a pretentious flop. In May 1973, Lindisfarne split in two with Alan Hull and Ray Jackson retaining the name while the other three formed a new band, Jack the Lad, who developed an engaging brand of folk-rock over a series of albums in the mid Seventies, but never managed to break out of the club circuit in the way the old Lindisfarne had.

The new Lindisfarne had little success either. Hull and Jackson recruited four more Newcastle musicians – Kenny Craddock (keyboards), Charlie Harcourt (guitar), Tommy Duffy (bass) and Paul Nichols (drums) – and cut two further albums before the group disbanded in 1975. Alan Hull had also been pursuing an erratic solo career on record, his best album being the caustic *Pipedream* (1973).

None of the original Lindisfarne members were able to find a suitable and popular format for their subsequent work, and a re-formation of Lindisfarne seemed on the cards. The band were tempted into it at Christmas 1976, following this up with a succession of annual reunion gigs. And, although they recorded some new material, scoring a hit with 'Run For Home' in 1978, it was still their trusty old anthems that their audiences flocked to hear.

DAVE LAING

Lindisfarne
Recommended Listening

Lindisfarne's Finest Hour (Charisma CAS 1108) (Includes: Lady Eleanor, Meet Me On The Corner, Down, Scarecrow Song, Fog On The Tyne, Go Back, Alan In The River With Flowers).

Right: The original Lindisfarne, from left Ray Jackson, Alan Hull, Ray Laidlaw, Simon Cowe and Rod Clements. Inset left: The new line-up on stage, 1974. Opposite: Hull maintains the band's boozy image.

FIVE-STAR FOLK

Did Pentangle shape a new musical blend?

PENTANGLE HAVE slipped so far back in the memory of most Sixties rock fans that it is difficult to recall how popular they were at the close of the decade. At that time the group could fill London's Royal Albert Hall without difficulty (as the cover picture of their *Basket Of Light* album suggested), and they were an international attraction of some standing. They were also in the premier rank of groups playing the UK concert hall and college circuit, on a par with such rock acts as Traffic, Pink Floyd and the Who. The fact that this seemed unimaginable a decade later is probably explained by the subsequent total eclipse of commercial folk music.

Pentangle was formed around the twin talents of guitarists Bert Jansch and John Renbourn. Both were prime exponents of the so-called folk baroque, a tradition instigated just a few years earlier by Davy Graham that had brought an instrumental virtuosity and eclecticism to folk for the first time. Jansch, born in Edinburgh on 3 November 1943 of Scottish-Austrian parentage, had become famous in folk clubs – a brooding, uncommunicative performer who found celebrity with songs like Graham's 'Anji' and his own 'Needle of Death'. (He subsequently disowned the latter, though at the time it was one of the most forthright and chilling songs about heroin addiction.) Both Jansch and Renbourn, a native Londoner, were influenced by American bluesmen like Big Bill Broonzy, although Jansch was the one who used such influences to fire his own songwriting technique; Renbourn subsequently developed an interest in the roots of English music.

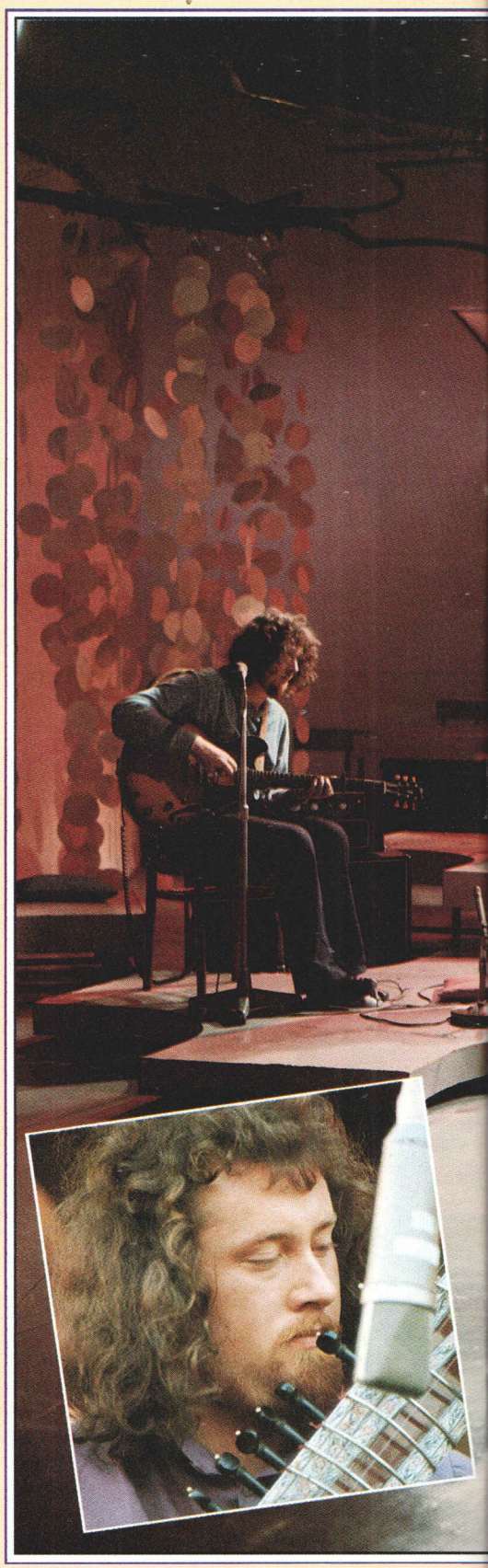
The folk clubs of the mid Sixties were booming, enabling Jansch (and later Renbourn) to establish enviable reputations as solo performers. They first recorded together in 1966, the resulting *Bert And John* LP highlighting the diverse facets of their guitar artistry. Its success paved the way for the formation of a complete group, which duly materialised as Pentangle late in 1967 after its five members had rehearsed at length in Jansch and Renbourn's own folk club, the Three Horseshoes in London's Tottenham Court Road.

Of the other three group members, Jacqui McShee (vocals) had previously worked the folk clubs in a double act with her sister and had also contributed vocals to Renbourn's *Another Monday* (1967). Danny Thompson (bass) and Terry Cox (drums), meanwhile, were accomplished session musicians who had previously played together with Alexis Korner's Blues Incorporated.

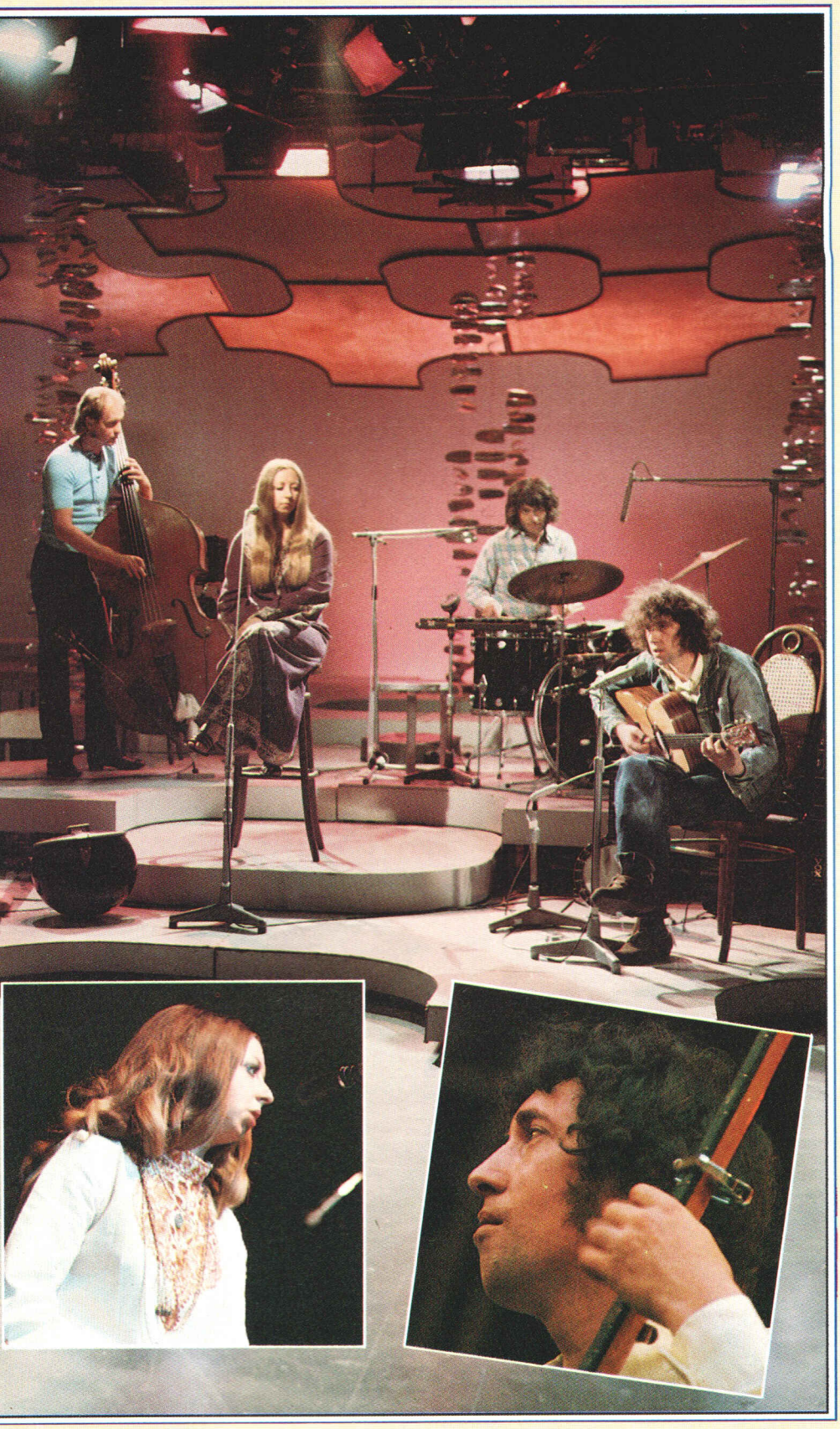
Uncharted waters

One of the many nebulous musical terms in vogue in 1967 was 'fusion'. Pentangle's *raison d'être* was to combine elements of blues, jazz and gospel under the umbrella of folk; in a word, fusion music. The group was thus an ambitious attempt to take contemporary music into uncharted waters. The concept was an interesting one; Jansch and Renbourn could sink their own prestigious names into the group, while Jo Lustig was adept at hustling publicity. Their debut album, *The Pentangle* (1968), released to coincide with the group's launch, served merely as an introduction. As they toured the United Kingdom, so the sheer quality of their live performances excited audience expectations for their next recorded work.

Sweet Child (1968) was a double album – a relatively rare occurrence in those days, testifying to the group's growing popularity. Double albums were, even then, frequently excuses for self-indulgence, but in Pentangle's case this extra room for manoeuvre was essential, since it enabled them to present a range of material that adequately reflected the singularly broad repertoire of their stage act.



Above: Pentangle bring their folk sounds to pop television. The group was formed in 1967 around the talents of guitarists John Renbourn (inset above) and Bert Jansch (inset far right) who were both prime exponents of the 'folk baroque' tradition. Jacqui McShee (inset above right), a veteran of the folk club circuit, provided the group with a sweet, unaffected voice.



Majority rules

The strengths of the band – the individual instrumental artistry and a strong affinity with a variety of musical traditions – were clearly focused. However diverse the influences, it was a cohesive work in which nothing seemed out of place, and it undoubtedly established the band in the top echelon of British groups. Indeed, they were the first alumni of the folk clubs to break through nationally and exchange a large minority audience for a significant majority one.

Basket Of Light was released in 1969 and contained 'Light Flight', the theme music of 'Take Three Girls', BBC-TV's first colour drama series. The song received considerable airplay and was the nearest the group got to a hit single, but its main impact was in stimulating sales of the album, which reached Number 5 in the charts just before Christmas 1969. Since the opposition included the Beatles' *Abbey Road* and the Rolling Stones' *Let It Bleed*, this was a considerable achievement.

The album – produced, like its predecessor, by Shel Talmy – was delightful in every respect, and fully merited its commercial success. As it transpired, however, it represented the apex of the group's fortunes. After that, they found it impossible either to develop their material or to increase their audience still further. They continued to be a headline attraction throughout 1970, though audiences were beginning to feel a sense of *déjà vu*, and that year's release, *Cruel Sister*, was a disappointment. In truth, the fusion idea had simply reached a logical conclusion. The group had never really achieved a fresh musical synthesis – they had just performed songs from different traditions consecutively, a fact that the introduction of electric guitar failed to conceal.

Solomon's judgement

Like many other folk-based acts, Pentangle fell victim to a creative dissatisfaction that sapped the confidence and resolution of the group members. Undoubtedly, it also had something to do with the inbuilt resistance of the UK audience to folk-oriented acts. Certainly, Jo Lustig – who went on to manage Steeleye Span, Fairport Convention (briefly) and the Chieftains, among others – would later experience exactly the same frustrations of being able to take these groups so far but no further.

In 1972 Pentangle switched labels to Reprise, a move that came too late to rekindle their popularity. Although that year's *Solomon's Seal* magnificently reasserted the group's traditional strengths, the critics treated it harshly and the public neglected it. The group fulfilled their remaining engagements before going their separate ways in March 1973. Danny Thompson went on to record and tour with John Martyn on several occasions, despite increasing health problems. Renbourn and McShee made a faltering attempt to put together a new group in 1974 – one that would have included Indian musicians – but the scheme was abandoned after a disappointing debut at the Cambridge Folk Festival.

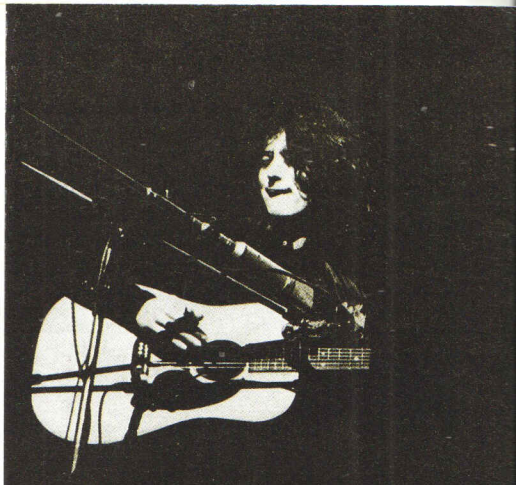
Pentangle reformed in 1982, with all the original members, again for the Cambridge Folk Festival. Their period of influence had long since passed, however, and the reformation attracted a bare minimum of interest.

BOB WOFFINDEN

Pentangle
Recommended Listening

Sweet Child (Transatlantic TRA 178) (Includes: Goodbye Pork Pie Hat, No More My Lord, The Time Has Come, Sweet Child, The Trees They Do Grow High, Moondog, Sovay).

HATS OFF TO HARPER



Roy Harper: minstrel, misfit and genius

Roy Harper is arguably British rock's longest-running underground attraction. Since he first strummed his way to public attention via the mid-Sixties folk scene his career has been a perplexing mixture of missed opportunity and sheer perversity. Every time he has seemed on the verge of a commercial breakthrough he has either been stricken by ill-health or opted for temporary retirement in the face of alleged public hostility. Like many of rock's self-styled outlaws, Harper has not been slow to adopt the role of martyr.

Yet his music has much to commend it. In common with that of Kevin Ayers or Robert Wyatt, it has an eccentricity that is thoroughly British; it is no coincidence that, like them, he has been unable to milk the lucrative American rock market (though he has made repeated efforts to do so). He remains very much a musician's musician. The often rambling melodic structure of his songs, the originality and complexity of his lyrics and his fiercely left-wing political stance have attracted a relatively small, though devoted, following. His commitment to his work is undeniable. As he said in an interview with *Rolling Stone* in June 1969: 'When I go to the States this summer I'm going to sit in front of an audience and sing "I Hate The White Man", knowing that probably someone in the audience will get up and aim a gun at my head. But unless you can put your blood on the streets, you're not worth what you're saying.'

Folk outlaw

While many who came up through the folk clubs of the mid Sixties abandoned their creative integrity or just lost their inspiration in the changing climate of the early Seventies, Harper expanded his music and showed that he was as convincing on stage with an electric band as he was playing solo with just guitar accompaniment. But then Harper was always something of an anomaly on the folk scene. His attitude towards his music had more in common with rock than with folk musicians; the folk circuit merely gave him somewhere to play where he'd be tolerated – or not, as the case may be. As he has said: 'I was never really in with that mob. I spent most of my time being thrown out of folk clubs for not being Ralph McTell.'

He had a difficult childhood: 'I think most of my problems can be traced back to the very heavy home scene I had when I was a child,' he later recalled, 'We had fights all the time.' He was born in Manchester on 12 June 1941. His mother died in childbirth and he was brought up by his stepmother, a Jehovah's Witness. Harper has been hostile to religion ever since; as he sings on 'The Spirit Lives', a track from 1975's *HQ*: 'The history of religion is the history of the state/Incestuous exploitation of a catalogue of hate.'

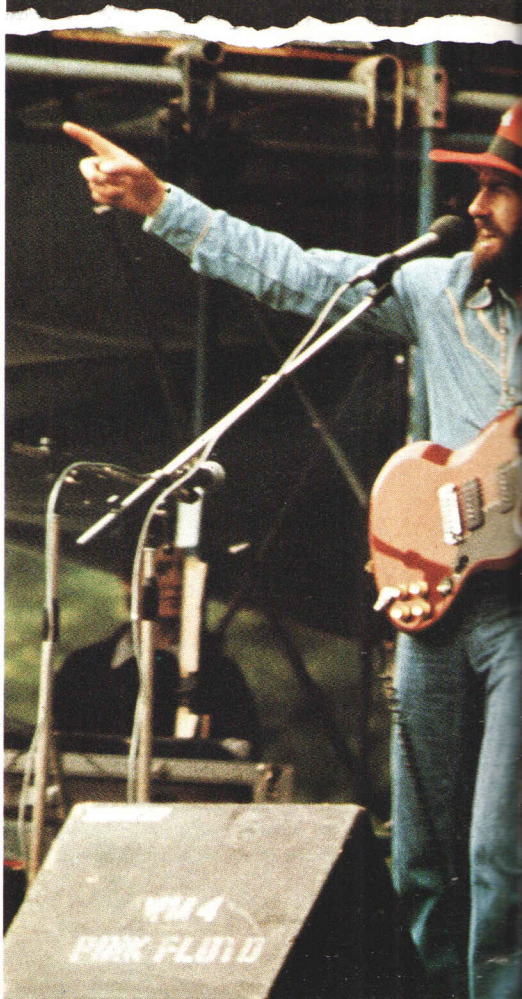
At 15 he was so keen to leave home that he joined the RAF. Within months he decided service life was not for him; to get out he feigned madness. He was discharged but wound up in a psychiatric hospital, where he was given electric shock treatment. 'Committed', a song from his first album, *The Sophisticated Beggar* (1966), alludes to this period. He subsequently attended a group therapy centre, was a patient at Lancaster Moor Mental Institute, and then had trouble with the law, being sent to prison on at least two occasions.

Like so many Fifties kids, Harper had started playing skiffle as an adolescent. He had played at camp concerts while in the RAF, and on his release from jail he started busking. In the summer of 1964 he did the obligatory 'On the Road' trek around Europe and had written enough good material by the time he returned to get a residency at Les Cousins, the Soho folk club where singers like Bert Jansch, John Renbourn and Al Stewart all served their apprenticeships.

It was with the release of Harper's second album, *Come Out Fighting Genghis Smith* (1967), that he began to win attention. Though not a commercial success, it provided in embryonic form the qualities that would gain him his reputation as the country's 'paramount stoned freak poet'.

'Freak Street', an impression of Soho, 'Ageing Raver' and 'You Don't Need Money' highlighted Harper's surreal humour; 'Circle', running for a then almost unprecedented 11 minutes, and the eight-minute title cut were ambitious, declamatory, loosely structured songs. As he told an interviewer at the time: 'Some of my songs start out nice and suburbia and suddenly swing violently across to anarchy.' Despite its shortcomings the album – subsequently re-released on CBS' Embassy budget label as *The Early Years* – had much to commend it.

Its successor, *Folkjokeopus* (1969), confirmed Harper as an original if erratic songwriter-guitarist. Unfortunately this originality tended to work against him as far as commercial success was concerned, his music having few obvious antecedents. He was a regular performer at the series of free concerts that took place in London's Hyde Park in the late Sixties, but even in the burgeoning 'progressive' climate of the time he failed to win the admiration of more than a dedicated few. To them Harper's onstage unpredictability, which included engaging in furious arguments with the audience, proved that here was a



Top right: Roy Harper on stage with famous friend Jimmy Page, 1974. Right: Harper goes electric with his band Trigger at the Knebworth Festival, 1975.

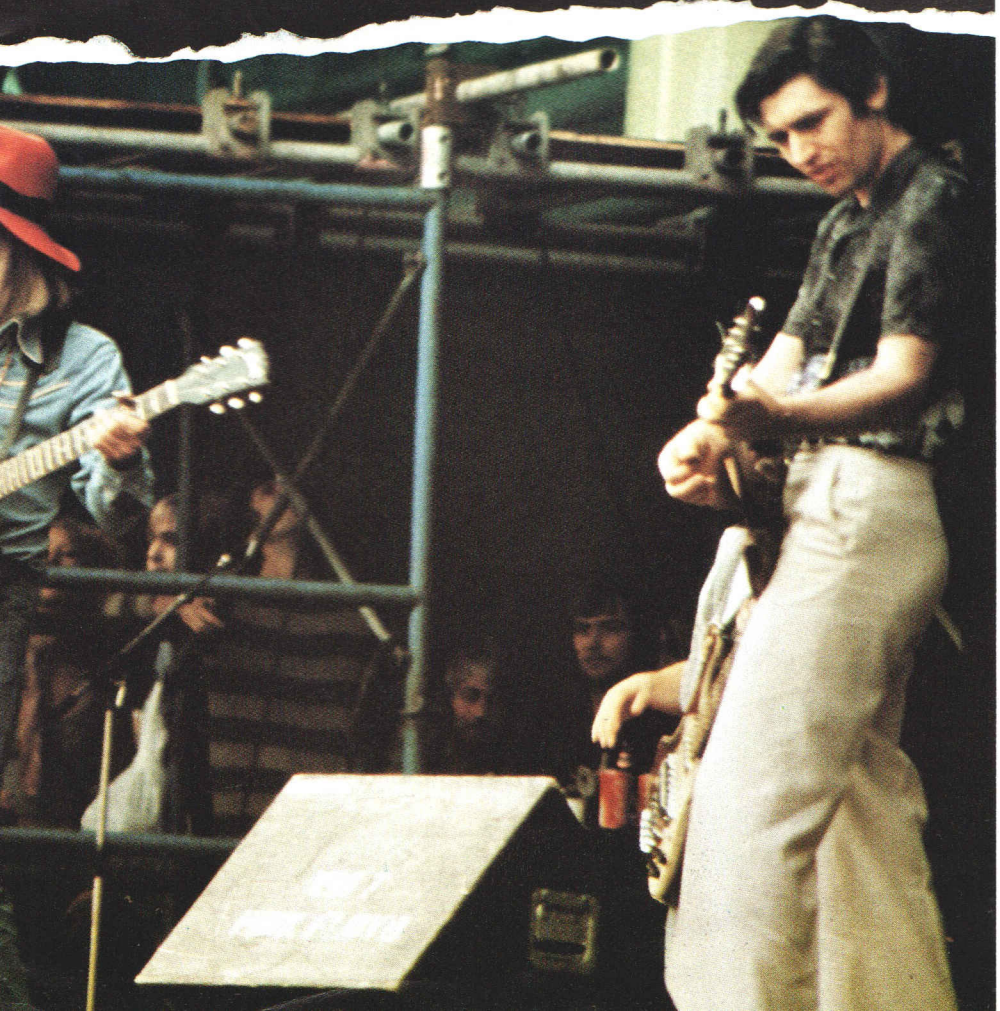
performer who wasn't just out for what he could get. For Harper, professionalism appeared to be the kiss of death.

Indictments of the state

Harper's fourth record label change came in 1970 when he released his first album for Harvest, EMI's newly-formed label for 'underground' acts (Harvest also had Pink Floyd on its books). Harper's association with the label was to last ten years. *Flat, Baroque And Berserk* (1970) featured two songs that were to become classics in Harper's repertoire – 'I Hate The White Man' and 'McGoohan's Blues'. The latter took its inspiration from the television series, 'The Prisoner', starring Patrick McGoohan as the victim of a futuristic state where the forces of repression reign supreme. 'I Hate The White Man' was a blistering attack on Western materialism, racism and authoritarianism with a side-swipe at God thrown in: 'I hate the white man/And his plastic excuse/I hate the white man/And the man who turned him loose.'

Harper, as has already been noted, had never been short of originality. On his next album, *Stormcock* (1971), his musical vision came into its own. Containing just four cuts, *Stormcock* showed him at the height of his powers as a writer and performer. Aided by producer Peter Jenner, he explored the possibilities of the recording studio for the first time in his career. With guitars, keyboards, vocals and on one track, 'Me And My Woman', the superlative string arrangements of David Bedford, Harper succeeded in creating a multi-textured patchwork of sound.

Listening to the album, it is not difficult to understand why Led Zeppelin's Jimmy Page, who plays guitar on this and many of his subsequent recordings, speaks so highly of Harper. The music had the same expansive quality that Zeppelin have achieved on occasion, regardless of the enormous differences in style between the two acts. 'Me And My Woman', in particular, was generous, adventurous rock music at its best. The mix of Bedford's strings and Harper's vigorous guitar work might have seemed inappropriate, but the end effect was sublime, the song having a deceptive mellifluence and lyricism that is all too rare in rock.



Stormcock did not sell as well as it deserved to do, and whatever commercial chances Harper had at this stage of his career were ruined by ill-health; his acting debut in a film, *Made* (1972), did not do much to raise his public stock either. His illness, a circulation disorder, was serious enough to warrant speculation about his imminent demise. However, he released his next album, *Lifemask*, in 1973 and that same year returned to live work. More elaborately arranged than its predecessor, *Lifemask* was exceptional for the apocalyptic 'The Lord's Prayer', which covered an entire side.

The subsequent *Valentine* (1971) was, by comparison, more conventional. Appropriately *Valentine* was an album of love songs, yet as 'Forbidden Fruit' showed, Harper had not veered towards the middle of the road. To promote the record he took the unexpected step of exploiting the esteem in which he was held by fellow rock musicians by playing a gig at London's Rainbow Theatre with an all-star backing band including Jimmy Page, Keith Moon and Ronnie Lane.

To be fair, Harper must have been feeling frustrated with the musical limitations of playing as a solo act, for he was soon to form his first band, Trigger. The band featured such high-calibre musicians as drummer Bill Bruford, formerly of Yes and King Crimson, and guitarist Chris Spedding, a veteran of numerous sessions and of the ill-starred Sharks.

Trigger happy

Harper and Trigger struck up an uncanny chemistry, playing a particularly striking set at the Knebworth Festival in 1975 when they supported Pink Floyd. If anyone had ever doubted Harper's ability to play and write rock'n'roll, Trigger should have convinced them otherwise. The album Harper made with Trigger, *HQ* (1975), echoed the greatness of *Stormcock*, albeit in a different way. The opening 'The Game' featured Harper's by now familiar stream-of-consciousness lyrics, but this time the collage of sound, underpinned by an archetypal rock riff, showcased some quite exceptional musicianship, notably from Messrs Bruford and Spedding. Elsewhere 'Grown Ups Are Just Silly Children' served as a reminder that Harper's didacticism has always been offset by a sense of fun. The album concluded with 'When An Old Cricketer Leaves The Crease', a beautiful piece of English nostalgia featuring David Bedford's haunting brass arrangement.

Potentially Harper was now in a position to establish himself as the major talent he so patently was. Instead, defiant to the

last, he announced his decision to quit Britain for America, blaming public apathy in his own land. Two years later Harper released *Bullinamingvase* (1977), which in 'One Of Those Days In England' contained Harper's most commercial song yet. Not only did it have a catchy hook, it also featured the McCartneys chirping away on backing vocals. 'One Of Those Days In England' was a minor hit and the album was critically acclaimed, but fate was not on Harper's side – he was hospitalised following speculation that he had caught a rare disease after reputedly giving the kiss of life to one of his sheep on his Herefordshire farm.

Harper recovered (the complaint was, in fact, a recurrence of his earlier problem) but appeared to lose his creative momentum; EMI rejected his next album, *Commercial Break*, and it was not until 1980 that he resurfaced with *The Unknown Soldier*. Neither it nor his next offering, *Work Of Heart* (1982), were up to the standard of either *Stormcock*, *HQ* or *Bullinamingvase*, but given the turbulent nature of Harper's personality and career it is impossible to write him off.

STEVE CLARKE

Left: One of those days in England – a self-styled 'outlaw of rock' poses by a window. Below: One of those days in France – Harper plays Paris, 1977.

Roy Harper
Recommended Listening

Harper 1970-1975 (Harvest SHSM 2025) (Includes: I Hate The White Man, Tom Tiddler's Ground, When An Old Cricketer Leaves The Crease, Don't You Grieve, Another Day, South Africa).

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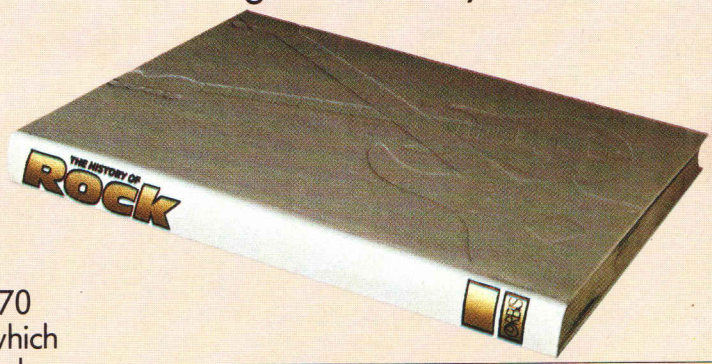

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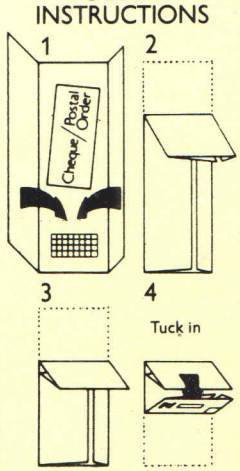

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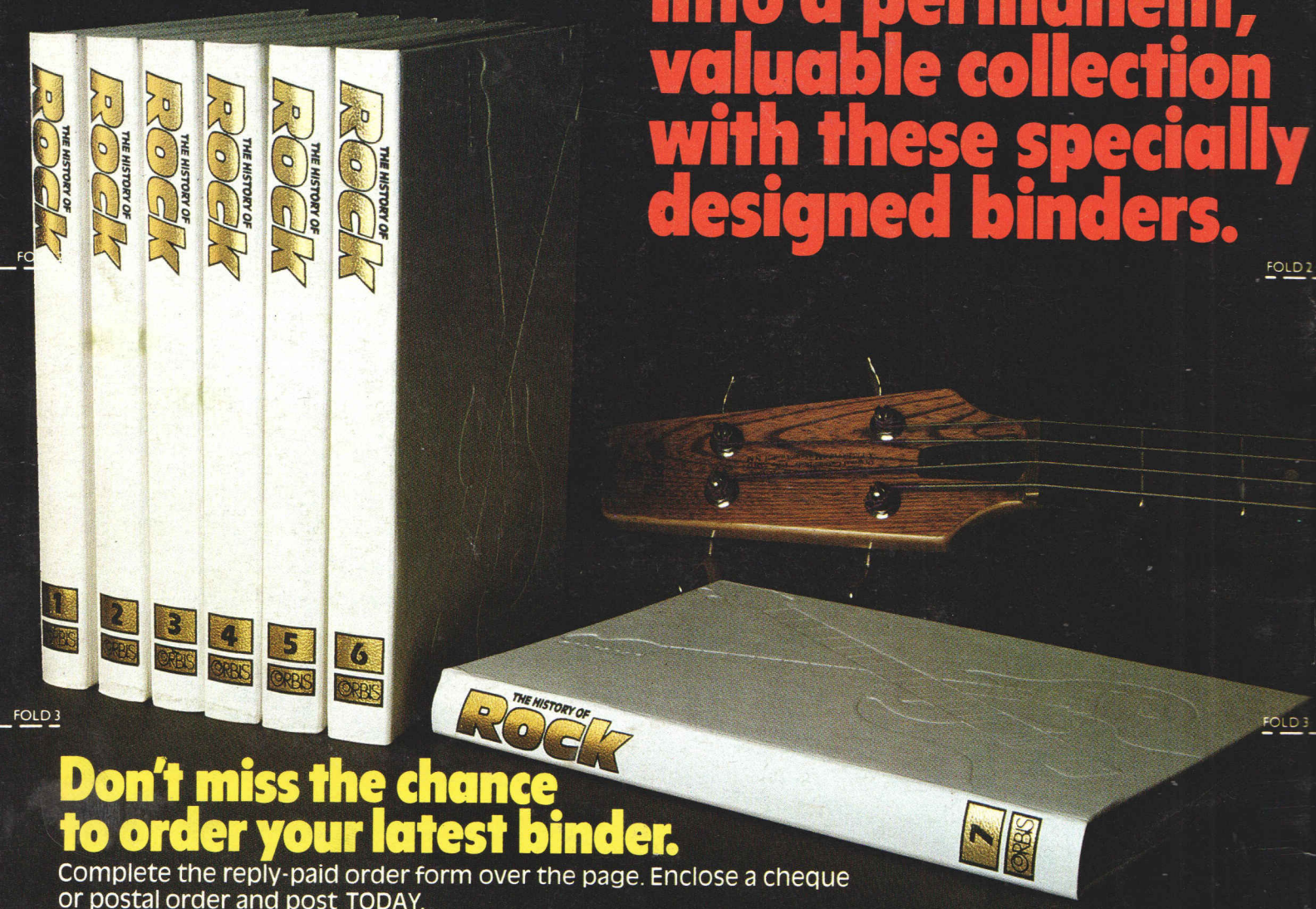

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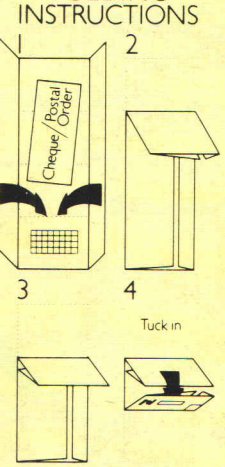

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